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## BANKRUPTCY

# Bankruptcy Judge Jones Named in a Lawsuit Over Romantic Relationship With Local Lawyer

A Houston judge confirms relationship with a lawyer whose former firm, Jackson Walker, brought major corporate reorganizations to his court

By Alexander Gladstone and Andrew Scurria

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The bankruptcy court in Houston has been a top venue in recent years for companies to restructure their balance sheets. PHOTO: CALLAGHAN O'HARE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

A Texas bankruptcy judge has been in a romantic relationship with a lawyer whose former firm brought major chapter 11 cases to his court, a premier landing spot for corporate reorganizations.

Judge David R. Jones, who has overseen some of the nation's largest chapter 11 cases in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Houston, told The Wall Street Journal he is in a relationship and has shared a home for years with bankruptcy lawyer Elizabeth Freeman.

Freeman worked at Texas law firm Jackson Walker's bankruptcy practice group until December 2022, when she left to start her own law firm. Jackson Walker, a leading Texas bankruptcy firm, filed chapter 11 cases that were assigned to Judge Jones while she was still a partner there.

The relationship between the judge and the lawyer surfaced publicly earlier this week when an individual plaintiff sued Judge Jones over rulings that he made while presiding over the 2020 bankruptcy case of offshore-drilling company **McDermott International**. The law firm Kirkland & Ellis represented McDermott with Jackson Walker as local counsel.

The plaintiff, Michael Van Deelen, was a shareholder in McDermott and has unsuccessfully pursued a variety of claims against the company, its advisers and the judge in bankruptcy court. In his lawsuit, Van Deelen alleged that Jones and Freeman's romantic relationship amounted to a conflict of interest and tainted his rulings in the McDermott case.

The judge confirmed the relationship in an interview with the Journal and said that he and Freeman agreed years ago that she herself would never appear in his courtroom.

Jones said he believes the relationship didn't need to be disclosed because he and Freeman aren't married and there was no economic benefit to him from her legal work.

"I came to the conclusion that I had no duty to disclose," said the judge, who joined the Houston court in 2011. He added that he didn't want to fuel a perception that "if you were going to be appearing, you should go out and hire Jackson Walker."

Jackson Walker files bankruptcy cases on its own, but is better known as local counsel working alongside large bankruptcy firms that have made the Houston bankruptcy court a top venue in recent years. Jackson Walker, on its website, said it has been local counsel for more sizable companies in chapter 11 than any other firm since 2022 and often serves as co-counsel alongside Kirkland & Ellis, which is among the nation's most prolific filers of large corporate bankruptcies.

Jackson Walker declined to comment. Representatives for Kirkland & Ellis didn't respond to a request for comment.

A representative with the Judicial Council of the Fifth Circuit, which is responsible for reviewing complaints of judicial misconduct in Texas courts, didn't respond to a request for comment.

Jones hasn't formally responded to Van Deelen's claims in court and declined to comment on the merits of the lawsuit. He also said he was under no obligation to recuse himself from cases involving Jackson Walker or Freeman's new solo firm, the Law Office of Liz Freeman.

"If for any reason I thought that I should have done something more, I would have done it," the judge said. "I'm certainly not afraid of my relationship, I just simply think I'm entitled to a certain degree of privacy. I and I alone made the call that so long as she never appeared in front of me, that was sufficient."

Jones said that he would have had a recusal obligation for cases involving Freeman's firm only if they had been married and had communal property. Judge Jones owns the home in Houston which he and Freeman reside in, and pays utilities and other expenses on the home.

Adam Levitin, a professor at Georgetown University Law Center who focuses on bankruptcy and commercial law, said that if Judge Jones was in a romantic relationship with a lawyer from Jackson Walker, he shouldn't have heard any bankruptcy cases in which Jackson Walker represented the company.

"It creates an appearance of impropriety and partiality," Levitin said. "A lawyer's conflicts are imputed to all other attorneys at the firm. She was a partner of the firm. It creates the possibility that a litigant feels that they lost not because of the merits of a case, but because of the relationships the judge has."

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